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ABSTRACT

Statistics and studies are reviewed to provide an overview of adult basic education (ABE) programs in community colleges. The review begins by presenting statistics on the magnitude of the adult literacy problem in the United States, citing information such as: over 57 million adults in America not enrolled in high school have less than a high school education; almost 23 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 65 do not have skills adequate to perform basic tasks such as addressing a letter; and there is an incredible gap between the number of persons who need literacy programs and those who were actually receiving it. Next, efforts to reduce adult illiteracy are summarized, at the national and state levels. The paper then traces the growing involvement of community colleges in ABE, citing reasons community colleges want responsibility for ABE and following the transfer of control over ABE functions from the secondary schools to the community colleges. The next two sections focus on the characteristics of ABE students and instructors. After a section on the levels of instruction and other factors affecting the effectiveness of ABE classes, the paper reviews funding considerations, such as costs, federal and state support, and special grant programs. The final section assesses the role of ABE within the context of the community college mission. A bibliography follows the resource review. (AYC)

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JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

August 1981

Adult Basic Education in Community Colleges

by John Grede and Jack Friedlander

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Adult basic education (ABE) programs are intended for persons who are 16 years of age or older, are out of school, and have not completed high school. These programs include courses from the first- through the eighth-grade levels in reading, language, arithmetic, English as a second language (ESL) as well as General Education Development (GED) courses which prepare students to pass a GED test and receive a certificate. Estimates on the number of persons eligible for ABE programs range from 54 million to 64 million adults. However, only 2 to 4 percent of this target population participate in ABE programs (Hunter and Harman, 1979).

In the past, delivery of ABE has been offered primarily through the public school system and only minimally by community colleges; however, in recent years an increasing number of community colleges have added ABE programs to their curricula. According to Lombardi (1978, p. 35), within the next 20 years ABE will be transferred from the secondary schools to the community colleges in all states.

What efforts have been taken to reduce adult illiteracy? What are the characteristics of the students and instructors in ABE programs? What are the educators' experiences with ABE classes? Who funds ABE programs? And, what are the consequences of offering pre-college-level courses in an institution of higher education? Each of these questions is addressed in this *Junior College Resource Review.*

Adult Illiteracy in the U.S.

The undereducated adult is a problem of growing concern. It is estimated that over 57 million adults (16 years or older) in America not enrolled in high school have less than a high school education, and 16 million adults have less than an eighth-grade education (Aker and Gant, 1980). Almost 23 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 65 do not have skills adequate to perform basic tasks such as addressing a letter so that it will reach its destination or interpreting a bus schedule or understanding a printed explanation of finance charges. An additional 34 million Americans are able to function but not proficiently (Hunter and Harman, 1979). Such data also do not account for the fact that many high school graduates are not literate — i.e., cannot read, write, or compute at the fifth-grade level, and cannot pass the adult GED exam or the U.S. Army entrance tests (Hunter and Harman, 1979, p. 8). These and similar findings are cause for alarm. The *Chicago Daily News* (October 3, 1973) dramatically noted "22 million called illiterate." The *New York Times* (April 24, 1977) proclaimed, "Illiteracy of Adults Called U.S. Disease." The magnitude of the problem was also documented in a 1975 progress report on U.S. programs to reduce adult illiteracy. The report revealed "...an incredible gap between the number of persons who might be seen as needing such assistance and those who were actually receiving it..." (*The Adult Basic Education Program,* 1975, p. 18).

Efforts to Reduce Adult Illiteracy

The passage of the Adult Education Act of 1966 and its subsequent amendments represents the major effort of the federal and state governments to reduce adult illiteracy. States receive federal funds according to a formula based on the number of persons 16 years and older who have not graduated from high school and who are not in school. Federal funding in 1972 amounted to just over 51 million dollars. In 1976 it was 67.5 million dollars. State and local funding in 1976 was about 184 million dollars (NACAE, 1977).

While state education agencies are ultimately responsible for the administration and supervision of all ABE programs within the state, most act as conduits for funding rather than as leaders in ABE practice. The primary initiative for the establishment and programming of activities rests, consequently, in local hands (Hunter and Harman, 1979, p. 65).

Enrollments in ABE programs have increased from about 38,000 in 1966 to an estimated 1.7 million in 1976. Among participants in 1976, about 20 percent were learning English as a second language and 5 percent of the ABE students were adults taking ABE courses in hospitals, correctional institutions, and other custodial facilities. Some 35 percent were unemployed, of this 9 percent were receiving public assistance (Hunter and Harman, 1979, p. 63).

Community Colleges and ABE

In several states ABE programs funded under the Adult Basic Education Act of 1966 fell within the administration and programmatic jurisdiction of the community college (Mattran, 1977). However, the instructional programs in adult basic education and in preparation for the GED examination are centered largely in the secondary schools and in many liaison arrangements with religious centers, community agencies, correctional institutions, hospitals, libraries, CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act), and many other local organizations and programs.

Most community colleges want responsibility for adult basic education for a variety of reasons — larger tax base, greater state funding, increased enrollments, expansion of the college's mission of providing educational services to adults in the community, and experience in working with educationally disadvantaged. For these and other reasons, states are transferring responsibility for ABE from the high schools to the community colleges (Lombardi, 1978, p. 35). Sometimes there is a complete takeover from the secondary schools. In Chicago the Board of Education, plagued by mounting deficits, has opted to slim down to its legal mandate and turn over its entire adult education program to the City Colleges system. In one short weekend in 1974 some 20,000 adults enrolled in ABE, GED, and ESL programs in several hundred locations became community college students. Along with Chicago, the community colleges of San Diego and San Francisco acquired sole jurisdiction over basic education for adults in the public institutions. In California, current legislative policy for adult education creates a fiscal incentive for a local community to shift some or all of its adult education classes away from the K-12 districts and into the community colleges (California State Legislature, 1981). The incentive exists because the range of courses that can be offered to adults is greater in the community colleges than in the K-12 districts. The rationale for encouraging this shift of ABE from the K-12 districts to the community colleges is based on the belief that "...adult students could benefit from better counseling, job placement assistance, financial help, and opportunities to develop a more comprehensive total educational program than what might be offered in the limited environment of the K-12 schools" (California State Legislature, 1981, p. 20).

By the late 1970s the community colleges in nearly every state were given partial or sole jurisdiction over adult basic education (Lombardi,

1978). The transfer of control over ABE functions from the secondary schools to the community colleges is taking place throughout the country at an uneven pace (Lombardi, 1978). For example, Sherron (1978) found that in Virginia only 2.5 percent of the ABE classes offered in 1978 were held in community colleges. In 1975 and 1976, about 14 percent of the total enrollment in Florida's community colleges were enrolled in adult elementary and secondary programs (Florida State Department of Education, 1977). In 1979, close to 30,000 students, representing 9 percent of the total enrollment in Illinois community colleges, were participating in ABE programs. An additional 16 percent of the students were enrolled in remedial and developmental programs for educationally disadvantaged students (Illinois Community College Board, 1980). Enrollments in ABE and high school diploma and equivalency programs in Iowa colleges in 1978-79 amounted to 4,880 full-time equivalent enrollment students (FTEE) or 10 percent of the total FTEE of 44,[illegible]3. This figure was up from 8 percent in 1975-76 (Iowa Department of Public Instruction, 1980). In Washington's community colleges enrollments in adult basic education have steadily increased each year and reached 3,648 in Fall, 1978, while enrollment in high school completion programs fluctuated from a high of 6,027 in Fall, 1975, to a low of 4,510 in Fall 1978 (Terry, 1979). As we begin the 1980s, however, the extent of literacy programs in the community colleges is not known. A national study to determine the extent and nature of ABE in community colleges is needed.

Who Participates in ABE?

In terms of educational achievement, in 1976, 32 percent of the ABE students were enrolled at the beginning level (grades 1 through 4), 33 percent at the intermediate level (grades 5 through 8), and 35 percent at the advance level (grades 9 through 12). About 9 percent of those enrolled in ABE in 1976 were certified as having achieved an eighth-grade level education and 11 percent passed the GED tests. A national survey showed that just over 40 percent of the classes were offered at the grade 1 through 8 level; 32 percent at the grade 9 through 12 level; and about 28 percent were ungraded (Boulmetis, 1979).

Several authors identify profiles of the ABE student which support the generalization that the target population is at the low end of the socioeconomic scale. The authors of a classic study in 1975 characterized ABE students in large urban communities as an "...astonishing potpourri of ethnic backgrounds, educational achievements (from being totally illiterate in any language to Ph.D.s with limited English mastery), ages (adolescence to old age), generation of citizenship (first, second, third, and so on), middle to lower SES (Socioeconomic Status), native ability (from clearly retarded to exceptionally bright), and a psychiatric range from quite disturbed to normal." (Mezirow and others, 1975, p. 11). Despite this diversity, ABE students were skewed toward the disadvantaged side. Poor people were generally the rule with 14 percent unemployed, 15 to 25 percent on welfare, and at least half of the remaining group unskilled or service workers with incomes below the poverty level.

ABE Instructors

Much of the available information on ABE instructors and classroom dynamics comes from an extensive study in the urban public schools (Mezirow and others, 1975). Eighty percent of those teaching ABE courses were doing so on a part-time basis. Two-thirds of these were presently teaching full-time in the public schools, and about 18 percent were housewives, most with training or experience as teachers. Half the full-time teachers had been public school teachers, while the rest had varied backgrounds, mostly as counselors, supervisors, and administrators. The instructors were inexperienced. Half had taught ABE for only a short time, and only one-third had more than four years' experience (Mezirow and others, 1975, p. 58).

Mattran (1977) has noted that due to the part-time commitment of ABE instructors and the fact that there are few career tracks for teachers in ABE, little preservice education has been developed. Mattran's observations are confirmed in the findings of two national studies which show that there has not been much effort at the state level in establishing formal procedures for granting credentials to ABE instructors (Jones and others, 1975; Boulmetis, 1979). For the most part, ABE instructors receive in-service or on-the-job training.

Instruction

ABE classes are typically divided into levels of instruction: grades 1 through 3; 4 through 6; 7 and 8; and high school equivalency. ESL classes are usually designated "beginning," "intermediate," and "advanced." Some large adult school and community colleges further differentiate classes by elementary and secondary school designations. The wide range of student educational backgrounds and abilities is the most significant, distinguishing characteristic of ABE classes. The wide variation in literacy levels found in many classes has, according to Harrison and others (1976), produced a veritable "little red school house" learning environment.

Other factors which operate to detract from the effectiveness of ABE classes are high rates of course attrition which have been found to range from more than 30 percent to over 50 percent (Sainty, 1971; Brightman, 1974; Boudreau, 1977), highly tentative student commitment to the course, erratic attendance patterns, and an open enrollment policy which permits students to begin and stop work in a class anytime during the term. Mezirow and others (1975) found that the heterogeneous student groupings within classes, absenteeism, and turn-over were, in the teachers' opinions, the most serious obstacles to learning and teaching.

Funding

According to Lombardi (1979), ABE programs are less costly for community colleges to operate than regular programs, because most ABE instructors are employed on a part-time basis and are paid at a lower hourly rate than the full-time instructors. In Florida the state average cost per full-time equivalent for remedial and ABE was $1,279, a figure lower than the $1,323 average cost for all programs. The Florida figure for remedial and ABE programs would be even lower if the low-cost ABE program was excluded (Florida State Department of Education, 1977).

Most basic education ABE and GED programs are supported either by federal ABE funds allocated to community colleges through a state education agency or by state ABE funds. In Iowa, federal funds earmarked for ABE were used to cover the costs of 3,423 FTEE, while the state reimbursed the colleges for most of the FTEE in non-ABE federally funded courses, such as high school diploma and high school equivalency. There is no tuition charge for students enrolled in ABE programs (Iowa State Department of Public Instruction, 1980).

In some states, funding of courses is restricted to only those which are bona fide instructional offerings requiring formal student registration, attendance, and course outlines. In New Jersey only enrollments in noncredit remedial, developmental, GED, and ABE courses are eligible for state funding (Griffiths, 1979). In 1979 the Washington state legislature considered a bill to make all persons 19 and over eligible for tuition-free high school completion studies in community colleges (Terry, 1979).

Much of the funding for ABE and ESL offered in Illinois community colleges is provided through the Disadvantaged Student Grant Program (Illinois Community College Board, 1980). Under this program, special grants for educationally disadvantaged students are distributed to community college districts on the basis of enrollment in remedial and developmental courses during the previous year. The amount of money appropriated to Illinois community colleges through the Disadvantaged Student Grant Program grew from 1.4 million dollars in 1973 to 4.7 million in 1980. The largest number of students served by the Disadvantaged Student Grant Program were enrolled in ABE courses.

ABE and the College Mission

ABE has the greatest potential for growth among community college programs. Only a small fraction of the estimated 57 million Americans lacking high school diplomas participate in ABE, and few are educated in community colleges. However, in planning to increase ABE enrollments educators need to take precautions to insure that this expansion is not achieved at the expense of the reputation of community colleges as providers of sound educational services or as legitimate institutions of higher education. Roueche and Armes (1980) estimate that over 50 percent of the students now entering community colleges read below the eighth-grade level and 20 to 35 percent at or below the fourth-grade level. Many of these students enroll in developmental or remedial programs, which now represent one of the colleges' most rapidly expanding but least successful functions (Lombardi, 1978). Although there are

many notable exceptions, students enrolled in developmental education programs have a high rate of course attrition, a low rate of program completion, and limited success in developing basic skills. These findings along with the high course attrition and low program completion rates in degree and occupational certificate programs have led state officials, legislators, and the public to question the ability of community colleges to provide quality education. The profile of potential ABE students described in Hunter and Harman (1979) suggests that their educational backgrounds, experiences, and life circumstances may make them even more difficult to serve than those students currently enrolled in developmental programs. Therefore, in order not to damage the academic reputation of the community college, institutional managers should consider their resources and capabilities before expanding enrollments in ABE.

If current growth trends of pretransfer, remedial, and ABE programs persist, then enrollment in below-college-level courses may well be several times larger than the combined enrollments in community college occupational and transfer programs (Lombardi, 1978). Some administrators see the growth in basic literacy programs as another factor contributing to the loss in status for community colleges as institutions of higher education.

To maintain their higher education status community colleges could offer all their below-college-level, postsecondary education programs in an extension division or in a separate institute, such as the Urban Skills Institute, operated by the City Colleges of Chicago since 1974. The advantage of such an institute or specialized division is that it can have its own faculty and counselors, trained to work with ABE students, and have appropriate instructional materials and technologies. In such an institute credit hours, semesters, set time-frames, and other such features of college-level courses would not have to be applied to the amount of time students spent in their studies, nor would such factors have to be used as a measure of faculty workload. The institute's primary concern could be to raise the skill level of students to either find an entry-level job or pass the high school equivalency tests, and in some cases, to advance into college-level programs. But as Richardson and Leslie (1980) have noted, the colleges will have to decide whether this type of institute will be tolerated within the framework of the traditional community college.

Conclusion

Much of the criticism of ABE programs, most taking place outside the community college, has been directed at the following aspects: inadequate preparation and experience of instructors in working with educationally underprepared adults; lack of full-time commitment of instructors and staff to the field of ABE; absence of sufficient counseling and other student personnel services; poor facilities; limited choice of instructional materials and equipment; lack of means of grouping students by achievement levels; and limited integration between ABE and vocational or career education (Niemi, 1976; Aker and Gant, 1980). Given their experience in working with poorly prepared adults, knowledge of instructional technologies, and excellent educational resources and facilities, community colleges are in a good position to provide sound ABE programs. But again, if college leaders decide to expand ABE, they should take care to assess the effects of those efforts on their other programs.

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